PALLIATIVE CARE

A Comprehensive Approach to Improving a Life with a Serious Medical Condition

By Fred Hitchcock, Program Manager at North Valley Geriatric Specialty Services

Everyone has seen the numbers that tell us of the enormous growth in seniors over the next few years. The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) predicts a growth of over 228% just in the Flathead Valley alone by the year 2030. Many of these folks will live much longer than in the past and as a result, will become more vulnerable to chronic illnesses that place an ever increasing demand on health care services. Hospitals have responded in many different ways to help their patients but one of the most exciting is the development of Palliative Medicine programs which are designed to help patients who need help managing complex and multiple chronic illnesses for the long-term.

Palliative Care is designed to provide support for those with serious, life-threatening illnesses and their families. Gone are the days when patients and their families face debilitating and life-threatening diseases in a system that sometimes feels fragmented in its response. Palliative Care offers a way to help balance the services and make the care more responsive to the needs of the patient and family over time. While there may not be any curative treatments available, Palliative Care can provide many options to improve quality of life.

The Center to Advance Palliative Care defines palliative care as "... specialized medical care for people with serious illnesses. It is focused on providing patients with relief from the symptoms, pain, and stress of a serious illness- whatever the diagnosis. The goal is to improve quality of life for both the patient and the family."

Palliative Care is put together to help the patient and family identify their goals and then figure out what is available to help them get there. A team, usually consisting of a physician board certified in Hospice and Palliative Medicine, a nurse, a licensed clinical social worker, and a chaplain, is designed to address the major concerns and visit the patient and family wherever they may be- the hospital, the emergency department or at home. The team listens to the patient and family as they decide what THEIR goals of care encompass. This good communication helps family and patients make good decisions about care.

Palliative Care is not hospice. Admission to hospice requires a physician to determine that a patient be considered to have less than six months to live. The patient and family choose NOT to receive aggressive, curative care. Hospice focuses on care rather than cure.

On the other hand, Palliative Care would ideally begin at the time of diagnosis for a serious illness. Age is not a consideration since the focus is on the diagnosis, not the age of the patient. There is no life expectancy requirement and palliative care can complement, rather than replace, curative care. The Palliative Care team works with the primary care physician and keeps the provider informed as to the care plan recommendations and the goals of care that are developed along the way.

You may ask, “How do I know if I could be helped by a referral to a Palliative Care Team?” You can discuss this with your primary care physician, emergency department staff, or your hospitalist if you are in the hospital. They can all help connect you to the team and arrange your initial consultation. Palliative Care does not replace your care, but complements the care you are already receiving. It is no different from being referred to a cardiologist if you have a heart problem.

Palliative Care might be an option if you have a need for symptom management that might include problems with pain, nausea, vomiting, anxiety and fatigue especially if you are dealing with chronic diseases. Sometimes we all need assistance in making difficult medical decisions or addressing practical needs for the patient and family that might include things like home care or medical devices.

The main thing to remember may be that every person wants to be part of the decisions that are made about their healthcare and their life. Palliative Care is there to help you reach your goals and to help your family understand and cope with the effects of chronic disease.

For more information on palliative services, contact North Valley Geriatric Specialty Services at 406-862-1030.